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PAUL BROUSSE

Paul Brousse was not in the strict sense of the word a Communard. That is to say, he was not a member of the Paris Commune, nor did he, so far as is known, take part in any of the simultaneous provincial uprisings. He was, however, of the Communard generation, he was politically committed to the radical movement, and was working on Guesde's *Les Droits de l'Homme* in Montpellier when the Commune was declared. He suffered from its consequences, and he drew conclusions from it which bore on his own distinctive contribution to the French socialist movement. In other words, he was as affected by it as many of his generation who were more directly involved, but in a way which prevented him from falling into the sectarianism compounded of personal and ideological issues which were characteristic of much of the Communard exile generation. These factors, plus his undoubted significance in the revival of the socialist movement in France in the late 1870's, justify his inclusion in a symposium of this kind.

At the time of the Commune, Brousse, then 27, a medical student and the son of a University Professor at Montpellier, had been involved in political activities for only a short while. In 1869 he had begun to work for a radical newspaper, *La Liberté*, and in 1870 had been elected to the administrative committee of Jules Guesde's radical Montpellier-based newspaper *Les Droits de l'Homme*. This newspaper strongly defended the Commune, invoked Government repression, and Guesde was forced to take refuge in Switzerland. Just as the events of the Commune pushed Guesde leftwards to a point on the political spectrum where radicalism merged imperceptibly with socialism, so they did with Brousse, and having been associated with attempts by Emile Digeon in late 1871 after the crushing of the Commune to create a regional left-wing radical organisation in the Midi, he joined the Montpellier section of the International sometime in the first half of 1872, at a time when the French Government, through the Dufaure Law, was proscribing the organisation because of its alleged involvement in the events of 1871. In the absence of any kind of writings by Brousse at this time,

one can only conclude that his political evolution was a progressive linear development under the impact of external events from radicalism to socialism; a socialism, however, which was distinctively anarchist.

Immediately prior to the Hague Congress of the International in September 1872 Brousse was expelled from the Montpellier section for his opposition to Dentraygues' participation as a "Marxist" delegate, and at the same time he joined the Jura Federation. Caught in the débâcle following upon the break-up of the International in the Midi, he fled to Spain and early in 1873 became associated with Alerini and Camet in Barcelona, who were strongly under Bakunin's influence. For a while, Brousse adopted a simple Bakuninist standpoint, and through the newspaper *La Solidarité Révolutionnaire* and in his pamphlet *L'Etat à Versailles et dans l'Association Internationale des Travailleurs*, published in Geneva shortly after he arrived there in September 1873, of which he claimed Bakunin had spoken highly, he propounded an unsophisticated and derivative Bakuninist anarchism.

Arriving in Switzerland in September 1873 he took part in the Geneva Congress of the International (as indeed he did in all of its later Congresses), and then moved to Berne. Here he created a strong section of the International and was instrumental in founding a German language newspaper, *Die Arbeiter-Zeitung*, to spread revolutionary propaganda amongst the German Swiss population. It was at this time too that he met and established a long-lasting liaison with Natalie Landsberg, a Russian émigré student.

During the period 1876-1878 Brousse became an extreme exponent within the Jura Federation of "propaganda by the deed", and worked through his control of *L'Avant-Garde* (the organ of the French Federation of the International), against Guillaume and in association with Kropotkin (who took up residence in the Jura early in 1877), to prevent any *rapprochement* between what he perceived as an essentially *anarchist* Jura Federation, and other organisations within the framework of the European socialist movement. He came very close to sharing Costa's views on the value of propaganda by the deed, and in September 1877 was sentenced to a short period of imprisonment for his part in organising a demonstration, held at Berne in March 1877 to commemorate the anniversary of the Commune, which developed into a fracas with the police, and which Brousse claimed as an example of propaganda by the deed. He was imprisoned again in April 1879 as a result of Swiss Governmental prosecution of *L'Avant-Garde* for the alleged publication of articles recommending "propaganda by the deed" and approving some of the political assassinations of 1878.

In the course of his experiences in the Jura Federation, however, Brousse modified his viewpoint. Already in a manifesto of February

1876, published in the name of the Berne section of the International, he called for a more serious study of the Commune as a means and principle of the revolution. He began to think of the commune – the administrative phenomenon – as a political unit within which, in certain circumstances, the working class could establish political control and establish socialism. At the Fribourg Congress of the Jura Federation in 1878 he argued that "si donc on obtenait l'autonomie des communes, on pourrait instaurer dans certains centres certains côtés de la société nouvelle et faire aux yeux de tous *la preuve par le fait* de l'excellence de nos principes et la possibilité de leur application",[1] and that use of the vote could therefore be justified in opposing a commune to the central government. This marked the beginning of the period crystallized by his experiences in London in 1879 and 1880 (where he was the main figure in a newspaper called *Le Travail*) and his involvement with the socialist movement in Paris to which he went in July 1880, during which Brousse moved away from anarchism and developed a theory of municipal socialism, which was outlined in his pamphlet of 1882, *La Commune et le Parti Ouvrier*. In this he declared that "le pouvoir, dont la conquête s'impose au prolétariat du fait même de la situation, c'est le pouvoir municipal, c'est la Municipalité, c'est la Commune [...] la conquête des municipalités, voilà la première forme que prend pour notre jeune Parti ouvrier la tradition communale française."[2] This idea was clearly closely linked to, and sprang from, the communal tradition within the anarchist movement, and marked a less radical break with his past than perhaps commonly supposed. Thus for Brousse the tradition of the Commune was accommodated within the flexible framework of a pragmatic, realistic, and "possibilist"approach to political action, which provided the theoretical basis for the *Fédération des Travailleurs Socialistes*, or Possibilist Party, of which Brousse became the effective leader in the 1880's. This flexibility was made possible partly by the fact that Brousse was unhampered by any personal or sectarian legacies of active participation within the Commune.

If flexible adaptation and exploitation of the rhetoric of the Commune provided a positive element in Brousse's contribution to French socialist thought, a negative element against which he reacted was provided by his perception of the reasons why the Commune, but more particularly the International, whose fate in terms of the socialist movement in France was inextricably bound up with it, had failed.

[1] For the Fribourg Congress, see L'Avant-Garde, 12 August and 9 September 1878.

[2] La Commune et le Parti Ouvrier, p. 6.

Brousse, like Guesde at the beginning of the 1870's, attributed its collapse partly to the centralised structure imposed upon it by Marx and the General Council, and he became and remained throughout his career an ardent anti-Marxist. His anti-Marxism – as expressed in his *Marxisme dans l'Internationale* (1882) – was posited more on tactical than on theoretical grounds, and by succeeding in having Guesde and Lafargue expelled from the Party in 1882 on the grounds of their allegiance to "the Pope in London", he ensured that the mainstream of socialist activity in France in the 1880's developed outside the Marxist framework.

This anti-Marxism, derived from the polemics of the exile period, is clearly seen in his attitude to the various attempts to establish a new International in the 1880's, when his main objectives were to have the Possibilists recognized as the only legitimate French Socialist Party, and to prevent any new International falling into Guesdist hands. He expressed this viewpoint most clearly in a letter written to César de Paepe in February 1884 accusing him of favoring the Guesdists: "Il y a en France une organisation, le parti ouvrier, qui veut vivre en conformant son évolution à son milieu, et il y a en Europe une faction marxiste qui a envoyé à Paris le gendre du maître, M. Paul Lafargue et un acheté M. Jules Guesde. Je ne comprends pas qu'un homme qui a vécu comme toi l'Internationale tu puisses encore être la dupe des mêmes intrigants et des mêmes intrigues." This, however, was a battle he was to lose.

Brousse's lack of active involvement in the Commune was both an advantage and a disadvantage. During his years of exile in Spain, Switzerland, Belgium and London it was undoubtedly an advantage, in that he himself avoided the traditional pitfalls of many of the Communards – in-fighting and sterile sectarianism – and could not therefore be identified easily with factions which might have affected his activities and influence as an important member of the French exile community. Thus his authority was unsullied, and he was in a strong position when he returned to France in 1880. On the other hand, in his rivalry with Allemane in the 1880's the latter's "ideological integrity" deriving from his Communard status was in part responsible for the success of his campaign against Brousse, who, through his underestimation of the strength of the Commune's legacy, offended working-class susceptibility in his laudable attempt to make the Socialist Party a viable political force.[1]

[1] See D. Stafford, From Anarchism to Reformism: A Study of the Activities of Paul Brousse (London 1971).

The unexpected swing to the Right in the elections of 1885 led Brousse to emphasize the need to defend the Republic, and Allemane to discourage provocative and gratuitous militancy by the rank and file. They both defended their arguments on the grounds that the Party was weak and could not afford to compromise its position, and their arguments appeared to be vindicated in the Paris municipal elections of 1887 when 9 candidates were returned to the Municipal Council, including Brousse himself. These results, however, created strains within the Party between its elected members and the main body of the Party in Paris, strains which increased after both Allemane and Brousse, along with other leading members of the Party, joined with Radicals such as Ranc and Clemenceau to form the *Société des Droits de l'Homme* in May 1888 as a pressure group to defend the Republic against the rising Boulangist threat. Pressure from the Parisian rank and file (for whom alliance with the Radicals was synonymous with collaboration with the "murderers of Versailles") forced the leadership to resign from the *Société* in August, 1888. It was the decision of the Party leadership to support the candidature of Jacques, the Republican candidate, in January 1889, which brought matters to a head. Allemane, who up to that point had not dissented from the position of the leadership, now came forward to assume the leadership of the dissident rank and file, and in May, 1890 he recommenced publication of *Le Parti Ouvrier* (first founded by him to counter the Boulangist threat in 1888) which soon became seen as a rival to the official Party newspaper of Brousse, *Le Prolétariat*. Brousse now came under both personal and political attack, and his position within the leadership was weakened by the deaths of two of his strongest supporters, Chabert and Joffrin, in July and September, 1890. By this time Brousse had lost control of the *Union Fédérative* (the Parisian regional organization) and at its tenth Congress it adopted resolutions severely critical of his leadership. Brousse thereupon used a Party Congress at Châtellerault to drive Allemane and his followers out of the Party, but in so doing destroyed it, by removing some of its most active members.

Brousse himself continued to be politically active. He was a member of the socialist *Comité de Vigilance*, founded at the height of the Dreyfus crisis in 1898, and of the committee to implement the unification resolutions of the Salle Japy Congress of 1898; but he was increasingly eclipsed (unlike Guesde) by new figures such as Jaurès, Viviani, and Millerand, who assumed the leadership of reformism. Although eclipsed as a national figure, Brousse's major concern was with municipal affairs, and in 1905 he headed, in his capacity as President of the Paris Municipal Council, a delegation of 60 councillors to London. He was

elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 1906 and became associated with the right wing of the SFIO, lost his seat in 1910, and died two years later as Director of the Ville Evrard Mental Hospital, at the age of sixty-eight.